



John O'Brien Democrat and Chronicle

About 500 yards from Middleport Elementary School and just beyond the school's snow-covered athletic field is the FMC Corp. plant where the Nov. 15 spill occurred.

Spill still a worry in Middleport

Chemical's effects scare residents

By John O'Brien
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MIDDLEPORT — For the past three weeks, Don Shade's eyes have been irritated and he has been plagued by congestion in his chest.

But it wasn't until last week that Shade grew suspicious about the possible cause of his illness.

He was one of several firefighters who responded to a chemical spill at the FMC Corp. plant here Nov. 15 — a spill that sent a small cloud of poisonous methyl isocyanate gas into the hallways of Middleport Elementary School.

Now Shade and other Middleport residents — especially parents of school-age children — are shocked by the news that methyl isocyanate is the same chemical that has killed more than 2,000 people in Bhopal, India, since Dec. 3, when 25 tons of it leaked from a Union Carbide Corp. plant there.

FMC officials announced late last week that the plant will stop using methyl isocyanate after the current stock is gone, which should take about a week.

This rural, tree-shaded Niagara County village of about 2,000 people is half a world away from Bhopal, but some residents here say the terror in that city has left them feeling as if they're living with a timebomb.

"It doesn't put my boys at ease any to go to school, and I hate to make them go," said Bob Rosenbeck, whose two sons attend Middleport High School about 500 yards from FMC.

About 30 gallons of the deadly chemical, which is used to make pesticides, leaked from a 200-gallon tank at the Middleport plant, according to FMC spokesman James Minsker.

The spill occurred as workers were using a valve to remove the chemical from the tank. A contractor had mistakenly replaced a metal plug in the valve with a plastic one, which the methyl isocyanate dissolved, Minsker said.

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Middleport is still worried about spill

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The spill was immediately covered with a carbon compound that prevented most of it from vaporizing, Minsker said.

Methyl isocyanate is a cyanide compound that, when inhaled as a gas, can cause fatal pulmonary edema — a fluid accumulation in the lungs that causes drowning. It can also cause ulceration of the cornea in the eye and blindness.

Minsker said Nov. 15 was the first time the chemical ever was spilled at the FMC plant.

Other residents say the FMC spill didn't compare to the one in India, and that they have only minor concerns about living near a plant that regularly uses methyl isocyanate.

"It's a little upsetting knowing the same thing could happen here, but the company in India was not as cautious as FMC is," said Julie Maedl, whose daughter was treated at a hospital for eye irritation and minor breathing problems after the spill. "We're between a rock and a hard place. We'd hate to see FMC leave."

About 160 workers are employed at the plant, according to the company.

Only three weeks ago, school Superintendent William Bassett and officials at the FMC Corp. were basking in praise for their handling of the spill.

For the past week, however, some



Scott Kempton

of the calls to Bassett's office have been less complimentary.

"The general feeling right after the spill was that everybody did a super job," Bassett said. "But the last few days, we've been getting a different reaction from parents. It's understandable. People are bound to be concerned after what happened in India."

"Suddenly, everyone wants to know what the chemical is and how much is here."

The elementary school, with more than 500 students, is about 500 yards from the FMC plant. The high school, with 1,000 students, is adjacent to the elementary school.

Because winds were from the southwest the day of the spill, a small cloud of the lethal gas was carried into a courtyard of the elementary school and was then sucked into the school by ventilators, said Middleport Fire Chief Scott Kemp-

ton. But the high school was unaffected.

FMC workers washed students' eyes at the elementary school, but they didn't evacuate the building for about 45 minutes, Kempton said.

Since the disaster in India, FMC officials have been criticized for not taking the Middleport spill more seriously. Kempton has accused the company of "downplaying the entire situation by trying to handle it themselves."

Kempton said the company did not notify authorities until about 4 minutes after the spill, and even then reported only "an eye irritation at the elementary school."

"We're equipped to handle a spill (of methyl isocyanate), but we can't do anything if the company doesn't notify us. We thought we had a good working relationship with FMC until now. It was like they were trying to cover the whole thing up."

FMC's Minsker denied Kempton's allegations, however, saying the company carried out a detailed emergency plan with the school and it worked. None of the students was seriously injured, he said.

Superintendent Bassett also defended FMC officials.

"I honestly believe they were more concerned about our students than they were about their stockholders or their public image," Bassett said of FMC officials. "They had a man down at the school within minutes."

School nurses have been checking for any lasting effects of the chemical and have found none among the students, Bassett said. But even so, some parents are very concerned.